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ABSTRACT

The study of communication phenomena in China by a foreigner poses unique challenges. It requires not only understanding the particular phenomenon under analysis but also the cultural context within which the phenomenon exists. This paper focuses on meanings conveyed in 1987 that were related to the government campaign against bourgeois liberalization in China. Noting that this requires Western appreciation of bourgeois liberalization within the Chinese cultural context and the year 1987 as a particular point in post-Mao China, the paper first presents a brief orientation as helpful context regarding cultural and chronological developments. The author has visited China 10 times and in April 1987 was teaching at Northern Jiaotong University in Beijing, where he surveyed the opinions of a class of graduate students about the development and meaning of bourgeois liberalization. The paper reviews the literature produced by and about the Chinese government and also uses student opinions as manifested in the survey. It suggests that this subject is significant for speech communication scholars, as the term "bourgeois liberalization" exemplifies language which is created to be purposely vague. The expression was created by the Chinese government to describe unwanted ideas and values identified as American or Western. (Contains 27 references.) (NKA)

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AN ANALYSIS OF MEANINGS RELATED TO THE 1987 CAMPAIGN AGAINST BOURGEOIS LIBERALIZATION IN CHINA

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The study of communication phenomena in China, by a foreigner, poses unique challenges. It requires not only understanding the particular phenomenon under analysis but also the cultural context within which the phenomenon exists. In *Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication*, Ray Heisey (2000, p. xix) stresses how the integration of Eastern and Western perspectives on communication will benefit from understanding the cultures within which these communicative practices exist. It is in that spirit that I have proceeded with this analysis.

I have chosen to focus on meanings conveyed in 1987 that were related to the government campaign against bourgeois liberalization in China. This requires Western appreciation of bourgeois liberalization within the Chinese cultural context and the year 1987 as a particular point in post-Mao China. A brief orientation will provide helpful context regarding cultural and chronological developments.

After being closed to the outside world for thirty years, the People's Republic of China reversed its policy of isolation in the late 1970's by initiating a variety of economic, political, cultural, and educational reforms. The primary objective behind these reforms has been to modernize China and help it compete in the world market. The modernization of such a large country has involved a variety of obstacles.

One such obstacle has been how to import western technologies without importing western lifestyles. Increased interaction with the U.S. best exemplifies this situation. The People's Republic of China is a socialist society, governed by a communist party, and the U.S. is a capitalist society governed as a democracy. Thus, the Chinese government can benefit greatly from foreign interaction but stands to have its cultural values affected in major ways if this interaction is left unchecked.

The opening of China is a complex situation. China is comprised of a variety of cultures that date back thousands of years. An ironic contradiction to the Chinese way of life is the existence of Hong Kong in the south. Hong Kong, which was governed by England until 1997, is connected geographically but is miles apart ideologically. Hong Kong is very developed as a capitalist power in the world market. In 1997, China recovered jurisdiction of Hong Kong, and it recovered Macao (a similar type of capitalist area previously governed by Portugal) in 1999 and has been faced with the question of what to do with its control of two former capitalist protectorates.

The current plan is for China to allow Hong Kong to keep its capitalist system for at least 50 years. This approach, referred to as "one country, two systems," has provided a testing ground for the acquisition of Macao and the intended acquisition of Taiwan. The recovering of Hong Kong is vaguely described by the Chinese government. "To keep Hong Kong's system unchanged, it is imperative to maintain socialism with Chinese characteristics under the leadership of the Communist Party" ("No Change...," 1987, p. 5).

The Chinese government has a sensitive task to deal with: how to praise (and adopt the developments practiced by) countries that have ideological perspectives which are contradictory to those of China. This presents an ideological tightrope, where the Chinese government must concurrently praise and condemn. It is obvious, even to the casual observer visiting China, that American values have found their way onto the Chinese landscape. American music, western clothing, and the widespread use of the English language attest to such developments in the popular culture. As the Chinese people embrace American technology they also seem to be embracing the American way

of life. The Chinese government has labeled this negative practice as "bourgeois liberalization."

I have visited China ten times. During my visits to China, I frequently heard this expression, or saw it in the press, but rarely could find a definition of it. Otherwise articulate individuals would become somewhat puzzled and confused when asked to define it. It was recognized as important but not easily defined.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the term "bourgeois liberalization" and describe how it has been used by the Chinese government as a label for unwanted American influences. I will focus primarily on 1987 as this period set the stage for the nationwide protests and government crackdown in 1989. This discussion will be based on a review of literature produced by and about the Chinese government and a written survey of student opinions at Northern Jiaotong University, Beijing, where I was a visiting professor in 1987. This subject is significant for speech communication scholars, as the term "bourgeois liberalization" exemplifies language which is created to be purposely vague. The term draws part of its meaning from this intentional vagueness. The expression was created by the Chinese government to describe unwanted ideas and values which have been readily identified as American or Western. When terms such as this are created, meanings are communicated through high context interaction processes.

In September 1986, the Chinese government issued a document entitled *Resolution of the Central Committee of the CPC on the Guiding Principles for Building a Socialist Society with an Advanced Culture and Ideology.* This official document defines bourgeois liberalization as "negating the socialist system in favor of capitalism" and goes

on to say it "is in total contradiction of the people's interests and to the historical trend, and it is therefore firmly opposed by the masses" (*Resolution of the Central Committee*, 1986, p. 13).

The Chinese media consistently emphasized that the modernization of China must be done in accordance with the "four cardinal principles." The principles are "keeping to the socialist road, upholding the people's democratic dictatorship, upholding the leadership of the Communist party, and upholding Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought" (*Resolution of the Central Committee*, 1986, p. 4). The frequent emphasis on these principles by the Chinese government cannot be overemphasized.

China is eager to open to the outside world, but only on its own terms. The following paragraph provides a description of these terms.

> Closing one's country to external contact results only in stagnation and backwardness. We resolutely reject the capitalist ideological and social systems that defend oppression and exploitation, and we reject all the ugly and decadent aspects of capitalism. Nevertheless, we should do our utmost to learn from all countries .... Otherwise, we shall remain ignorant and be unable to modernize our own country. (*Resolution of the Central Committee*, 1986, p. 6)

This proposed objective is referred to as "socialism with Chinese characteristics."

China's embracing of American technology exemplifies a love-hate relationship with the American culture. Zhao Ziyang, former Premier of the State Council, underscores this situation in his *Report on the Work of the Government*. "Opening to the outside world is a basic policy of our state.... In 1987 we shall open wider to the outside world and explore new possibilities for the effective use of foreign funds, the import of advanced technology and the earning of foreign exchange through export" (Ziyang, 1987, p. 25). Deng Xiaoping, shortly before stepping down as the leader of China, stated a similar

view. "The nation should emerge from its long-term seclusion and open itself to the outside world, because its development needs overseas capital, advanced technology and management expertise" ("Deng's Book Draws Lesson...," 1987, p. 4).

While praising interaction with the west on the one hand, Chinese leadership sharply warns of the dangers of adopting western values on the other hand. "We must not unthinkingly praise these western things, still less regard the decadent capitalist values and outlook on life as new ideas and disseminate them as such. Otherwise, they will contaminate and corrupt people's minds" (Ziyang, 1987, p. 34). Examples of negative western influences are frequently cited in the Chinese press. Some of these examples point to the corruption of youth, increased crime, the degeneration of literature, and misunderstandings in the universities.

Interaction with the West has been interpreted as both a problem and an opportunity for the youth of China. *China Daily* reported that "the motive for most crimes was money or sex oriented and that youth and juvenile delinquents were responsible for most of the cases" (Lixin, 1987, p. 1). The report continues, "Bourgeois lifestyles and publicity given to violence and crimes through films, television, pictorials and magazines stimulate teenagers to go astray" (Lixin, 1987, p. 1).

An interesting contrast in viewing western influences is provided in an article entitled "A New Way to Teach." This article describes how interaction with the west is changing the teaching of children.

> In the past we tried to mold children into ones who were not used to using their minds. But we cannot afford to do it to today's children, because they will enter a world full of competition. They have to be prepared to use their own questioning minds. (Xing, 1987, p. 5)

This unusual occurrence exemplifies an area where western approaches are preferred over traditional Chinese approaches. Generally, only western scientific technologies have been formally adopted.

Zhen Tianxiang, president of the Supreme People's Court, emphasizes the need to combat western influences to curb crime. He suggests "intensifying publicity about various laws and education in morality, ideals, discipline, and general knowledge, along with the efforts to resist all decadent and ugly aspects of capitalism" (Zhongshi, 1987, p. 1). Bourgeois liberalization has been blamed for literary problems such as rejecting the leadership of the Communist Party, divorcing art from politics and the encouragement of "sex literature." *China Daily* reports that "many talented young writers have been going astray and producing bad books due to the influence of bourgeois liberalization" ("In Literary Circles," 1987, p. 4).

A warning to writers was noted in April 1987. Zhang Xianliang, a leader of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, stated that the "struggle against bourgeois liberalization will make Chinese writers politically more mature, better able to understand life and more perceptive to reality" ("Struggle Makes Writers...," 1987, p. 1). Six weeks later, in an article entitled "Guidelines For Literature," misguided writers were taken to task for their "incorrect ways." "Some writers, however, have forgotten their social responsibilities... spreading corrupt ideas, blindly worshipping foreign cultures and copying foreign things mechanically. This has been resented and criticized by the masses" (Danchen, 1987, p. 4).

Zhao Ziyang's *Report on the Work of the Government* stresses the necessary struggle against bourgeois liberalization. "If bourgeois liberalization were allowed to spread

unchecked, it would adversely affect even more people (especially a part of the young people) who would lose their bearings, and it would plunge our country into turmoil..." (Ziyang, 1987, p. 28). He concludes, "We must take a firm, clear-cut stand in relation to this struggle and never hesitate or waver" (Ziyang, 1987, p. 28).

The most widely publicized aspect of the campaign against bourgeois liberalization during this period resulted after student demonstrations that occurred in December 1986. Key leaders of the movement were criticized for their actions, and the protests were dismissed as misguided youthful exuberance. Yet the opening of China continued to pose problems on the campuses.

Robert L. Jacobsen, a writer for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, wrote a series of reports on higher education in China. Regarding the opening of China, and its effects on campuses, Jacobsen quotes a group interview he conducted.

> "Once you open your society," says one of China's more progressive university leaders, "you cannot close it again." But on hearing that, another official at the same institution retorts, "I've always believed that when you come to a turn in the road, you have to slow down." (Jacobsen, 1987, p. 42)

Chinese leaders do not underestimate the influence of student protesters, since many of them were once student protesters.

In April 1987 I surveyed the opinions of a class of graduate students I taught at Northern Jiaotong University in Beijing. The survey dealt with the development and meaning of bourgeois liberalization. All fourteen students in the class voluntarily participated in the survey. Their participation was not rewarded and the results were not shared. Their ages ranged from 24 to 26, the survey was done anonymously.

(SA — strongly agree, A — agree, N — neutral, D — disagree, SD — strongly disagree)

1. Bourgeois liberalization is reflective of western influences.

SA	A	N	D	SD
7%	36%	21%	36%	—

2. Bourgeois liberalization is more reflective of U.S. influences than any other country.

SA	A	N	D	SD
7%	21%	29%	29%	14%

3. Usage of bourgeois liberalization has become common within the last six months.

SA	A	N	D	SD
50%	43%	7%	—	—

4. Bourgeois liberalization ideals can be found in clothing.

SA	A	N	D	SD
—	7%	—	64%	29%

5. Bourgeois liberalization ideals can be found in dancing.

SA	A	N	D	SD
—	14%	7%	65%	14%

6. Bourgeois liberalization ideals can be found in music.

SA	A	N	D	SD
—	7%	7%	57%	29%

7. Bourgeois liberalization ideals can be found in literature.

SA	A	N	D	SD
—	72%	14%	7%	7%

8. Bourgeois liberalization ideals are becoming more common because of increased trade with the U.S.

SA	A	N	D	SD
—	57%	29%	14%	—

9. The best way to eradicate bourgeois liberalization ideals is to cease trade and interaction with the U.S.

SA	A	N	D	SD
—	7%	7%	36%	50%

10. If unchecked, bourgeois liberalization can become a serious problem in the People's Republic of China.

SA	A	N	D	SD
—	72%	14%	14%	—

11. Bourgeois liberalization means "negating the socialist system in favor of capitalism."

SA	A	N	D	SD
7%	43%	29%	14%	7%

The survey provided an uncommon opportunity to solicit student views on a sensitive subject. Opportunities to collect such data are far less common in China, compared to the U.S., due to the social and political climate. This consideration is discussed later in this chapter.

The survey indicates an increased usage of the term bourgeois liberalization in the six-month period prior to the survey, as 93% indicated that the term had not been common until recently (question 3). Bourgeois liberalization is far more evident in literature (question 7) than in other forms of expression such as clothing, dancing, and music (questions 4, 5, and 6).

Fifty-seven percent felt bourgeois liberalization ideals are becoming more common because of increased trade with the U.S. (29% were neutral) but only seven percent felt the best way to eradicate bourgeois liberalization is to cease trade/interaction with the U.S. (7% were neutral). These areas are covered in questions 8 and 9. Seventy-two percent agree (14% were neutral) that if left unchecked bourgeois liberalization can become a serious problem in the People's Republic of China (question 10).

Interpretation of the survey responses must be done in light of the fact that an American was collecting the information. Although their names were not connected with their responses, they did know I would be interpreting their responses. Aside from their possible reticence to share their thoughts with a foreigner they may have modified their views so they would not be offensive.

The media and students were readily aware of bourgeois liberalization and its possible effects in China but nobody seemed to want any major crackdown similar to that experienced during the cultural revolution. The lessons of those years (1966-1976) seem to be too painfully recent to risk a similar situation. Perhaps this explains why only seven percent of students surveyed supported the ceasing of trade/interaction with the U.S. as a means of eradicating bourgeois liberalization.

The fears of any reaction against bourgeois liberalization which might resemble the cultural revolution period were evidenced in the press. *Newsweek* quotes a confidential party directive as saying "the party leadership urged communists not to allow their campaign against bourgeois liberalization— meaning western influences—to degenerate into personal vendettas against other party members" ("The Long Shadow of Mao," 1987, p. 40). Chinese leader Zhao Ziyang, in his *Report on the Work of the Government*, stated, "No attempt will be made to ferret out exponents of bourgeois liberalization at various levels, to implicate people at higher or lower levels or to have everybody make self-criticisms" (Ziyang, 1987, p. 30). He has emphasized that "no cultural revolution type political campaigns would be launched" ("On Student Unrest," 1987, p. 24).

A new phrase evolved in August 1987 which was an interesting follow-up to bourgeois liberalization. *Newsweek* reported "editorials that recently attacked bourgeois liberalization now denounce ossified thinking—a code phrase for positions that undercut Deng" (Deng Xiaoping's reforms) ("Deng's Balancing Act," 1987, p. 3). Ironically, the term bourgeois liberalization was coined to oppose reform, and "ossified thinking" was coined to promote reform. Governmental usage of such vague terms must surely be confusing for one who is trying to follow the party line. As indicated earlier, analysis of the term bourgeois liberalization is relevant to the speech communication scholar, as the term exemplifies language that is created to be purposely vague.

Devito (1986, p. 148) states that language is "a social institution designed, modified, and extended (some purists might even say distorted) to meet the everchanging needs of the culture or subculture." In this case, the term bourgeois liberalization was introduced because there was a need to vaguely describe ideas and values which were to be

discouraged but could not be accurately defined according to the communication context of the Chinese language. The element of context is important in this understanding. "As we grow up in the world, our experience is formed by the language in which it is presented and talked about, and this language becomes so much a part of the mind as to seem a part of nature" (White, 1984, p. 276). Ochs emphasizes this degree of context more strongly in saying that "language is the major vehicle for accomplishing communication, language functions both *in* context and *as* context, simultaneously constructing and being constructed by the social occasion" (1979, p. 206).

Chinese people, and the Chinese language which reflects the culture, are less likely to communicate ideas in a direct manner in comparison to people in the United States. "Within Chinese conversational style is a tendency to respond in terms of expectations, goals, even models rather than mundane facts" (Murray, 1983, p. 13). The important role of context cannot be overstated when the aforementioned is paralleled with the system of government in China. "China's governance involves both the overt system of public institutions with whose members we interact rather easily and the more shadowy system of political and security organs whose work is not open..." (Murray, 1983, p. 10). Thus, analysis of the term bourgeois liberalization indicates that the Chinese government communicates meaning on this subject in a manner which parallels the way meanings are communicated in day-to-day interactions in China. This process is defined as high-context communication.

Hall (1984) states that high-context cultures must provide a context and setting and let the point evolve. Low-context cultures are much more direct and to the point. Andersen (1987, p. 23) explains that "languages are some of the most explicit communication

systems but the Chinese language is an implicit high context system." He goes on to explain that "explicit forms of communication such as verbal codes are more prevalent in low context cultures such as the United States and Northern Europe" (p. 24).

The term bourgeois liberalization, and to a lesser degree "ossified thinking," represent words which can be best understood in the high-context communication system which exists in China. The terms were created to be intentionally vague by the Chinese government to promote desired changes in China's political climate. While this system might be confusing to most Americans (who are used to low-context interactions) this approach is more accepted in the Chinese culture (a high-context culture).

The opening of China provides a variety of opportunities for China to develop economically, technologically, educationally, and culturally. Similarly it offers western countries, such as the U.S., opportunities to expand in the same types of areas. Such development and expansion can be beneficial, but there is bound to be integration which creates conflict. Study of government emphasis on bourgeois liberalization during 1987 provides an opportunity to better understand how one culture chose to deal with such a conflict.

Chinese government concern with bourgeois liberalization and related issues has continued since the period under study (1987). Similarly, our understanding of variables linked to bourgeois liberalization has grown. The 1989 student-led protests, and subsequent government crackdown, brought worldwide attention on China and the challenges it faces as it modernizes. These challenges consistently evidence an emphasis on bourgeois liberalization.

On June 9, 1989, less than a week after the Chinese military opened fire on Chinese citizens in and around Tiananmen Square, Deng Xiaoping delivered his "June Ninth Speech to Martial Law Units." He stated "The nature of the current incident is basically the confrontation between the four cardinal principles [described earlier in this article] and bourgeois liberalization" (Deng, 1989).

On the third anniversary of the 1989 government crackdown, the U.S. Public Broadcasting System broadcast an episode of Frontline titled "China After Tiananmen." The role of bourgeois liberalization was stressed throughout the documentary. The following quotes exemplify this emphasis.

> Any word or deed that seemed threatening to the Party's leadership or authority became bourgeois liberalization.... Bourgeois liberalization? We often heard that word but, really, what does it mean? When we open the window of reform, some flies and mosquitoes may come in....We'll just kill the flies and mosquitoes, so we can resist the invasion of decadent influences like bourgeois ideas and lifestyles. (Frontline, 1992)

This evidences how bourgeois liberalization evades clear definition even under media scrutiny.

An explanation for social problems related to bourgeois liberalization was conveyed by Goh Keng Swee, a former deputy premier from Singapore who became an economic adviser to China. He indicates the Chinese political structure is not compatible with a market economy. "The problems stem from Beijing's attempts at grafting a market economy on a political system designed for a command economy (Goh, 1994).

Eradication efforts by the government against bourgeois liberalization continued during the 1990's and into the new millenium. "China started off 1997 with a strong media assault against immoral literature and dance....The government's ongoing 'spiritual civilization' campaign follows a call from Chinese President Jiang Zemin to toe

the party line at all costs" (Zhou and Jia, 1997). "The leadership in Beijing is planning a campaign to crack down on 'pro-West' intellectuals....President Jiang Zemin has warned against these intellectuals in internal speeches, and is reportedly ready to launch an ideological purge of the party's 'bourgeois liberal' elements" (Wang and Wu, 2000).

Understanding bourgeois liberalization and its implications is a challenge for Chinese citizens and even more so for non-Chinese. It is an inherently vague concept and is constantly subject to modified interpretation. With the hindsight of 13 years, perhaps the most basic description of bourgeois liberalization in 1987 and beyond can be found in the explanation conveyed by Jack Linchuan Qiu. "The crucial difference between the 'political reform' and 'bourgeois liberalization' is that the former is within the party-state institution, while the latter is without. Political changes for the destruction of Communist ideology are offensive, whereas those for improvement inside the socialist framework are tolerable" (Qiu, 2000, p. 257).

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